

Is the Tabernacle truly the cathedral of Welsh nonconformity?

School of Architecture, Built and Natural Environment

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Introduction:

Built between 1870 and 1871, the Tabernacle is labelled 'The cathedral of Welsh nonconformity', embodying the celebration of the methodist revival sweeping Wales during the 18th century. Created by architect John Humphreys, the Tabernacle sought to represent the newfound political influence Wales had acquired, ambitiously contrasting the plainer designs of the 16th century, with grandeur and an impending proportionality (Jones, 1996).



Figure 1: The Tabernacle in Morriston (personal collection, 2023)



Figure 2: The Tabernacle in Morriston (personal collection, 2023)

Main body:

The plan shown below highlights some of the important structural features of the Tabernacle. Unlike the rectangular design of a typical church, the interior of the Tabernacle has sweeping curves that separate the gallery from the nave. These curves create a sense of community and intimacy among the visitors, immersing them in a spiritual experience surrounding the vicar and the altar. This is supported by the entrances to the first and second floors, which have curved walls to reinforce the circular design. The irregular convex shape of the Tabernacle, with a slightly concave design towards the end, also enhances the space's acoustics, by allowing space for sound waves to bounce between walls, heightening the senses and enhancing the choir gallery. Additionally, the curve is designed to highlight the altar and make it appear more prominent, allowing the vicar to stand out and to be seen from all angles. The Tabernacle has a seating capacity of 1480 people, reinforcing how grand the church would have been in its day.

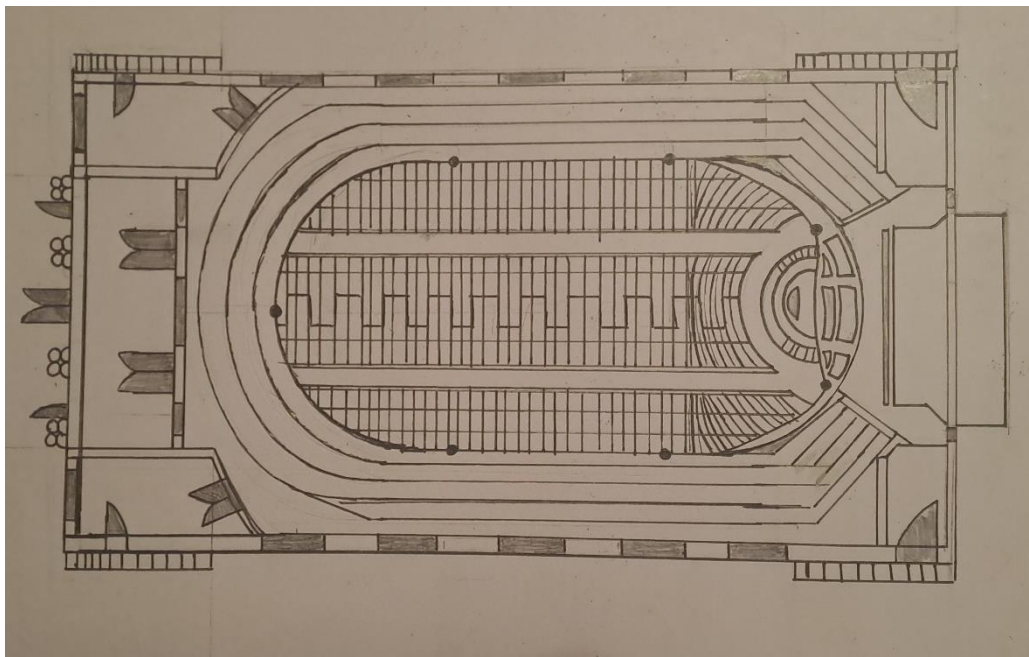


Figure 3: Plan of Tabernacle (personal collection, 2023)

Included in the section below, are the nave, the gallery, the narthex, the basement, and the attic, spanning across 4 floors. The gallery is held up by multiple slender iron columns. The narthex is significantly shorter in height, creating the illusion of the church expanding in volume upon entry. There are 70 windows, featuring elongated mullions, and bar tracery decorated with an octofoil applique. The glass itself also has a subtle pattern on it, evidencing the detail and craftsmanship that went into designing and creating the church.

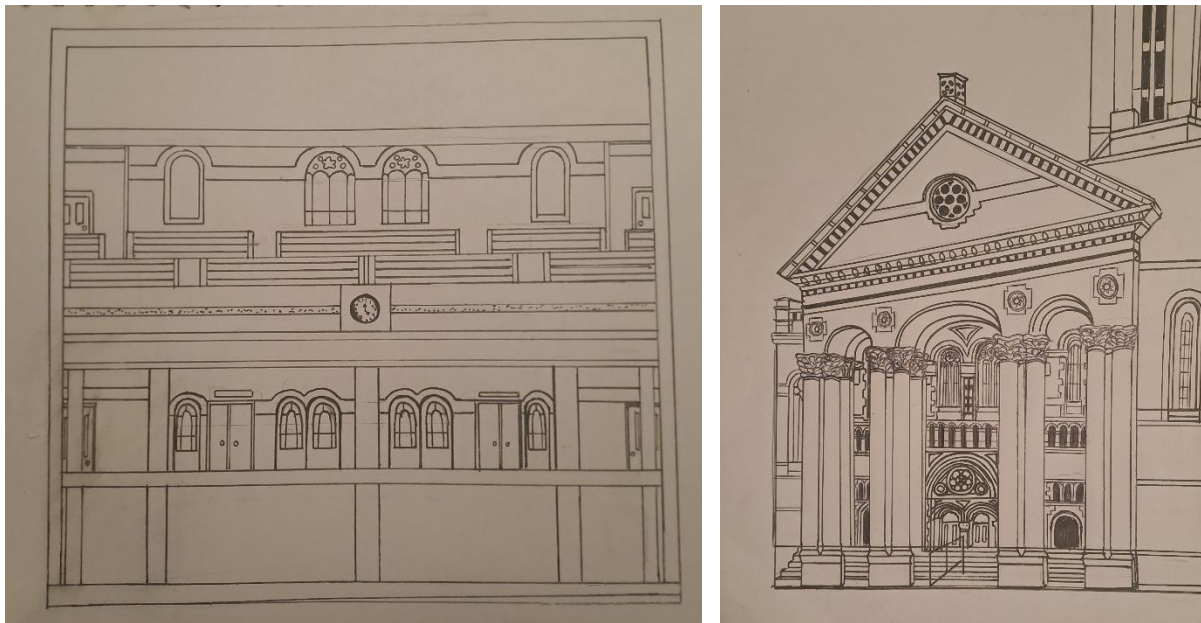


Figure 4: Section and drawing of Tabernacle (personal collection, 2023)

The Tabernacle is labelled the 'nonconformist church' due to its grand statement pieces, and detailing. Internally, the church resembles that of a barrel vault, showcasing gold detailed panelling, and timber ribs leading across the ceiling onto triangular corbels. The continuation of the curved gallery, into the curved ribs on the ceiling reinforces the idea of the visitors being sat in a circular motion, all huddled together in unison. The seating of the gallery is constructed from mahogany representing the status of the church, presenting its importance and sophistication at the time. The warm tone colour palette of the church is drastically contrasted by the stained glass windows on the back wall, immediately drawing the eyes of visitors to the message upon the glass.

Externally, the Tabernacle showcases classical design features, displaying 8 large Corinthian columns along the entrance of the church, emphasised by the Corinthian pilasters that sit behind them. Upon climbing the stairs, it presents fluted archways, held up by Corinthian pilasters guiding the visitor towards the doorways. Mirrored in the portico of the building, there is a simple rose window decorated with bar tracery that sits upon the arches. The variation of geometry presented within the building, includes oval, circular and rectangular shapes, enhancing the classical façade by including a variation of pattern and design. However,

according to the church itself, [Morrison Tabernacle], (2023), the most notable feature of the church is the tower east of the building; with its spire reaching 160 feet tall. In the 1800s, the spire would have been seen as a bold, unusual design feature, in contrast to previous Welsh architecture which consisted of small simpler designs. The enormity of the spire allows it to be seen from the surrounding areas of Morrison, establishing the physical space that the church dominated.

Amongst the rise in nonconformity in the 1800s, the Tabernacle was bold and challenged typical architecture, featuring a lavish interior, and striking structural elements such as the spire. The creation of the church marked a historical shift, representing not only a change in architecture but a change in the values and morals felt by the community. (Jones 1996) highlights that due to the success of the Tabernacle and the change in values that accompanied it, Humprey was tasked with creating 3 additional prototypes of the initial design. Although lacking in funds to establish certain features such as the spire, or mahogany interior, the non-conformity of the Tabernacle inspired the following designs, embracing features such as the 4 grand Corinthian columns, a similar plan and section, and the layout of features such as the portico and windows.



Figure 5: Churches inspired by the Tabernacle (adapted from Jones,1996, p.72)

To gain a deeper understanding of the ease of movement around the space, contact was made with the secretary working in the Tabernacle. A few of the comments addressed how impressive the space was when it was built in the 1800s, however, it was made apparent by (John, 2023) that the Tabernacle does “not meet today's requirements”. Firstly, a constraint mentioned was the entrance, and how those who are disabled and/or elderly find it hard to navigate the stairway, with no alternative point of entry available. Furthermore, many of the doors open outwards, creating difficulty in gaining access through them due to them hitting seating and decoration. Additionally, it was stated that many of the doors that open outwards

have stairways beyond them, causing accidents to those not paying attention. John also reinforces the impressiveness of the site, highlighting how the “quality of woodwork in the pews and pulpit impress” (John, 2023)

Conclusion:

To conclude, the Tabernacle was an influential building of its time, not only influencing societal values and moralities but also influential in the architecture that followed. It is concrete evidence of the nonconformity movement in Wales and is viewed as an integral vessel which supported the movement to flourish. To do a more concise study on this topic, in-person interviews and site surveying would be essential. This would allow an opportunity to explore societal reactions and to analyse plans and sections more thoroughly. Academically, conducting research, site visitation and interviewing members of the church has allowed the author to develop more knowledge on the creation and importance of churches in society, and how architectural design not only plays a crucial role concerning structure but also in atmosphere and purpose.

Reference list:

Figure 5: Jones, Anthony (1996). *Welsh chapels*. Stroud: Sutton

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